



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & FAMILIES

"Let's Talk Respect"

Be curious, not judgmental.

Grades 6–8

Robert Hackenson Jr., MBA, CAOL · Dynamic Influence

dynamicinfluence.com

Start here

Your child sat through an assembly called "**Let's Talk Respect.**"

It isn't an anti-bullying lecture, and it isn't really about rules. It opens with a question:

Have you ever woken up and not wanted to come to school?

Most hands go up. Some of that is homework and some of it is being thirteen. But a good share of it is the building itself — how people in those hallways treat each other. That's the premise of the hour: **a school's culture is built by the students in it, one interaction at a time.**

Two ideas carry the whole thing, and they're the two worth having in your house:

**BEFORE YOU SAY SOMETHING, BEFORE YOU DO SOMETHING
— STOP AND PUT YOURSELF IN THE OTHER PERSON'S SHOES.**

BE CURIOUS, NOT JUDGMENTAL.

It's about twenty minutes of reading. If you only take one thing, take the second one — and the breathing on page 5.

Where empathy actually breaks

The Rule of Shoe arrives in the assembly as a card trick. A student picks a card from a shuffled deck; it reads **Think First**, with a shoe on it. Then she opens a box she's been holding the whole time, and there's a shoe inside.

It's the Golden Rule, and every thirteen-year-old has known it since they were five. So Robert spends the hour on the more interesting question: **why doesn't it work?**

Two things get in the way. One is feelings, which comes later. The other is this.

"I WOULD NEVER DO THAT"

He asks the room to think of something somebody did recently that made them think exactly that. Then he asks a different question:

Everything you know — all of it — where did it come from?

Three places:

Formal education. School, teachers, what you've read.

Personal experience. What has actually happened to you.

Outside influence. Family, friends, what you watch, what you scroll past.

And nobody else on earth has the same three.

So every judgment you make, you make through *that*. Which means when you look at somebody and think "*I would never do that*" — **you're judging their decision using a set of information they don't have.**

Then the line that matters:

We've gotten so quick to judge and label that we're no longer inquisitive.

Once you've decided what something means, you stop asking. That's the moment empathy ends — not when you disagree, but when you stop being curious.

What this means for you. The next time your child reports something somebody did, there's one question that changes the conversation: *"why do you think they did that?"* They will say *"because they're an idiot."* Ask again. The second answer is usually the real one, and it's the one that costs them the certainty.

The volcano

Here's the sequence Robert walks the room through. They finish his sentences, because every one of them recognizes it.

You wake up already in a bad mood. And here's what a brain does: once you've decided **today is going to be terrible, it starts hunting for proof.**

Phone's at 4%. *See?* No hot water. *Of course.* You get to school looking at everyone like they've already wronged you — and they look back the same way, because that's what you're putting out.

And it stacks. One thing, then another. Like a balloon getting bigger, waiting for one pin.

Then you get home, a sibling comes around the corner, and you unload on them.

They didn't deserve it. Every hand in the room goes up when Robert asks who's done it.

And then you say *"sorry, I didn't mean that."* Which isn't quite true. You meant it in that second — you just didn't mean it *about them.*

What this means for you. The explosion in your kitchen at five o'clock is very often not about the thing that happened at five o'clock. It's the eighth thing of the day, and the first seven happened somewhere you couldn't see. *"Did something already go wrong today?"* gets you considerably further than *"don't talk to me like that"* — and you can still deal with the tone afterward.

The breathing, done properly

This is the single most portable tool in the assembly. It's worth you learning it too, because **a child will not use a calming strategy they have never seen an adult use.**

People say *"just breathe"* and it does nothing, because the usual version is wrong. Robert's framing:

Your brain controls your body. Your breathing controls your brain.

And the actual instruction:

Breathe in for 10 seconds. Hold for 3. Breathe out for 12.

Repeat five times.

Try it right now, and notice two things: you probably ran out of room on the way in, and you rushed the way out.

It is supposed to feel uncomfortable. That discomfort is what moves attention out of the upset part of the brain. One round does very little. Five rounds does a lot.

If you also have a fourth or fifth grader, theirs is different — 10 seconds in, hold 5, out 10. Each version is taught to the age it's taught to. Use the one your child actually heard; they will correct you if you don't.

Also on the list from the assembly: **exercise; music, with actually moving to it; and a gratitude journal** — three things a day, which sounds soft until you try it for a week and notice your brain has to go hunting for good things instead of bad ones.

In class, students wrote a plan with three boxes, because what works in one place is unavailable in another:

At home	Music, moving, going outside, writing it down
At school	Something that doesn't get them noticed
Anywhere	Almost always the breathing — nobody can see you do it

Ask to see their three boxes, then ask the better question: *where will you actually be when you need it?*

Robert quotes Mike Tyson in the room: *everybody has a plan until you get punched in the face*. You cannot invent a strategy in the middle of being furious. That's the whole reason it gets written down in advance.

Not wrong — just different

A long stretch of the assembly is about the gap between *different* and *wrong*, and it's built out of three demonstrations your child will remember.

THE SANDWICH

Robert asks how you make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then describes his: **peanut butter on both slices**, jelly in the middle, edges pinched so it doesn't leak.

The room objects. Loudly. To a sandwich.

It works. It's a sandwich. **It's not wrong — it's different.** And you had a reaction to it, which is the interesting part.

THREE, OR FOUR

Two people stand on **opposite sides** of the same thing. One of them counts four. The other counts three.

How do I get the one who sees four to see that there are three?

The room gets there: *go around to the other side.*

Neither of them was lying, and neither of them was wrong. **They were standing somewhere different.** And the whole time they argued about who was right, nobody asked the one question that would have ended it in four seconds: *wait — you see four? How?*

THE ROPE

He throws a student one end of a rope and pulls.

What happens? **They pull back.** Every time.

And notice this stopped being about who's right thirty seconds ago. **It's about being pulled.**

That's every argument your child has ever had with you, and probably every one you've had with them.

DEBATE VERSUS CONVERSATION

A **debate** has a winner and a loser. That's the format. You're not listening — you're waiting, building your comeback while the other person's mouth is still moving.

A **conversation** doesn't have a score.

And then the question he puts to the room:

*Think of a time you competed and won. Now think of a time you lost. Which one taught you more?**

Debate stops empathy and keeps us dumb. Winning confirms what you already thought. **The goal isn't to win. The goal is to learn.**

What this means for you. When something they believe lands badly with you, the instinct is to correct it. That's a pull on the rope, and you already know what they do next. The alternative is to go stand where they're standing and ask what they're looking at. It's slower, and it's the only thing that has ever changed anybody's mind.

You can't see the hurt

Robert writes one sentence on the screen with nothing else around it:

"Rob, you're so stupid."

Is that an insult or a joke between friends? You cannot tell — **because almost nothing we actually mean is in the words**. It's in the face, the tone, the timing, whether we were smiling. Strip all of that out and the person reading fills in the rest from whatever mood they happen to be in.

Which is exactly why a text argument escalates and a face-to-face one usually doesn't. Both people read the worse version. At speed.

THE THREE THINGS STUDENTS ACTUALLY DO

Fire back immediately. Now there are two upset people and neither will be the first to stop.

Post about them — not *to* them. Vague enough to deny, specific enough that everyone knows.

Troll for sympathy. The sad post, the *"hang in there"* cat. Not telling anyone what happened; collecting *"omg are you ok??"* in the replies.

None of them has ever fixed anything. The sequence Robert gives instead:

PUT IT DOWN. CALM DOWN. THEN GO TALK TO THEM.

In that order. Out loud, in person, where they can see each other's faces.

THE TAP

This is the demonstration your child will mention, and it's a magic trick.

Two students stand facing each other. One of them closes her eyes. Robert taps the student whose eyes are **open** — and the one with her eyes closed feels it. Same shoulder. The room reacts the way you'd expect.

Then the line it was all for:

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

That phrase came before the internet. Back when all you had was sticks and stones.

JUST BECAUSE YOU DON'T PHYSICALLY TOUCH SOMEBODY DOESN'T MEAN THEY'RE NOT GOING TO FEEL IT.

And the reason a screen makes it worse:

You don't see the reaction. In person, somebody's face changes and you stop. Online, "*this is so funny*" keeps going — and it stopped being funny for them fifteen minutes ago. You just didn't see it.

He asks the room directly whether roasting ever goes too far. In person, they know: *the person's crying*. Online — **you don't know**. That's the whole gap.

Anonymous is worse again: no face, no name, no idea what you did. Robert calls that cowardly, in the room, in those words. And he names the real danger, which isn't that anybody is a bad person:

You don't actually see the hurt you're causing.

GOLDEN RULE 2.0

Post about others the way you'd want posted about you. Same rule. New room.

Mean, mad, or bullying?

This is the most practically useful part of the guide, and the part most likely to change how you respond at your own kitchen table.

Children call everything bullying. The word is badly over-used, and that costs them — because when everything is bullying, nothing gets the right response, and adults start discounting the reports.

Robert draws the line explicitly in the room: **everything up to this point — the bad mood, the misread text, the argument nobody would let go — is emotions, and how we interact. That isn't bullying. Bullying is a little different.**

It needs **three things present at once**:

1 • Intent to harm. The point is to hurt that person.

2 • An imbalance of power. Popularity, size, numbers, a secret, a position.

3 • It repeats. Not a one-off.

Say this part out loud when you explain it: calling something "not bullying" does not make it OK, and it does not mean nobody should do anything. Somebody being mean to your child is still somebody being mean to your child. It's about getting the help that actually fits.

THE FORMS, INCLUDING THE ONES THAT GET MISSED

Insults are the obvious one and the least common. The rest are harder to see:

- **Rumors**, started about somebody and spread by people with no idea if they're true
- **Outing** — telling something about somebody that was theirs to tell. This gets left off every list and it is one of the most damaging
- **Leaving people out, on purpose, and making sure they know.** The photo posted *specifically* so the person who wasn't there sees it. There's nothing to point at, which is exactly why it works — and it is the most common form at this age

- **Rating people.** Lists, numbers, tier charts
- **Roasting** — when the person isn't laughing

If your child describes a group that never seems to have room for one particular kid, that's worth a question.

WHY WOULD SOMEBODY DO IT?

Almost always because something is wrong with *them*, not with the person they picked. They don't know how to handle their own thing, so it comes out sideways at somebody who isn't the cause.

It's insecurity. Putting somebody else down doesn't move you up. It only moves them down.

"BLOWING OUT SOMEBODY ELSE'S CANDLE DOESN'T MAKE YOURS GLOW ANY BRIGHTER."

And the line to repeat at home:

NOBODY IS BORN A BULLY.

It's a learned behavior. Somebody showed them. **Which means it can be unlearned.**

He says this in the room on purpose, because some student sitting there is realizing they're the one in the story. A child who feels branded defends the label. A child who believes they can change, changes.

Keeping your power

Bullying runs on an imbalance of power — and most of the time, **the power gets handed over by the reaction.**

Every child with a sibling already knows this. They know exactly which button to press, and the entire point is the moment the other person blows up.

So the question Robert puts to the room is: *when somebody says something to get a rise out of you, what are they actually after?*

WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE

If somebody made fun of Robert it would be about being bald, because people aren't original. So he gets there first.

"You're bald." → **"You're totally right, I am. You've got a nice head of hair — it's styled a lot of different ways."**

"You're so stupid." → **"I know, right? So dumb. That's why I'm in school — trying to get smarter."**

"You're ugly." → **"I know. This awkward stage is lasting forever."**

"You're an idiot." → **"Nailed it."** Or just a thumbs up, and nothing else.

They don't have to believe a word of it. The point is that there's nothing to push against.

You don't fight fire with fire. You fight fire with a fire extinguisher.

And the question underneath all of it, which is the one worth repeating at home:

WHY WOULD YOU HOLD WHAT THEY THINK OF YOU HIGHER THAN WHAT YOU THINK OF YOURSELF?

TWO THINGS TO SAY ALONGSIDE IT

It is never your child's fault for reacting. This is a tool, not a standard they failed. A thirteen-year-old who reacted and then hears they did it wrong has been hit twice.

And it doesn't apply to everything. If they're scared, if it's physical, or if it won't stop, Robert's rule is **self-defense: first your feet, then your voice**. You leave, then you tell somebody. That isn't losing your power — that's using it.

The story your child will remember

This is the part of the assembly students talk about afterward, and it's Robert's own.

He was in seventh grade, in a building that also housed the high school. A freshman named Matt — two years older, bigger — decided he had a problem with Robert, because Robert was friends with a girl Matt liked.

Six months of it. Gum thrown in his face. A water bottle emptied down the inside of his backpack.

Then one day, in the hallway before English, Matt and three of his friends backed him against the lockers. Everybody else had cleared out. Robert describes it as the wild west — tumbleweed rolling past. Fists clenched. Nowhere to go.

And a kid walked over.

Another freshman. Robert had seen him in the football locker room and that was it — **he did not know his name**. He stood next to Robert and said, *"Hey. What's going on?"*

Nothing happened. A few seconds later: *"Cool — come on, let's go."* And the two of them walked away.

What he said afterward: *"Don't worry about them, they're stupid. If you ever need help, let me know."*

Robert told his sister, a junior. Matt never spoke to him again.

He says he took two lessons out of it. One: don't mess with my sister. And two — **if he ever saw somebody in that spot, he'd be the one who walked over.**

The question he leaves the room with: that kid didn't fight anybody and didn't make a speech. **What did he actually do?**

He walked over and stood there.

The most important person in the hallway

Most students are not the one being targeted and not the one doing it.

They're watching. And almost nobody has ever told them what to do with that.

Robert asks why we don't act, and answers it honestly:

Sometimes we think **it's always going to be this way, and there's nothing I can do.**

That isn't true, and his claim is specific:

IF YOU STEP IN AS THE BYSTANDER, YOU CAN STOP IT INSIDE TEN SECONDS OF IT HAPPENING.

Ten seconds. That's the whole window, and it's why small things work.

WHAT THAT KID ACTUALLY DID

Every one of these is from the story. None of them requires your child to be brave.

- 1 • Went and stood next to him.** No words required at all.
- 2 • Asked, calmly.** *"Hey. What's going on?"* Not a challenge — a question.
- 3 • Gave him a way out.** *"Cool. Come on, let's go."* Not winning the moment. Ending it.
- 4 • Said something afterward.** *"Don't worry about them. If you ever need help, let me know."* Thirty seconds, and Robert still repeats it word for word.

And a fifth that students discount and shouldn't:

- 5 • Tell somebody.** Robert told his sister, and it stopped. **In his own case, telling is what actually ended it** — not the walking over.

HOW TO STEP IN WITHOUT MAKING IT WORSE

Robert teaches this explicitly, and it's the part most students have never been given. If your child is going to walk over, this is how:

- **Stay calm.** You cannot out-escalate somebody already escalated
- **Don't make it a shouting match** — if you raise it, they raise it
- **Allow space.** Don't crowd them, don't get in their face
- **Hands visible and open**, at your sides. **Not pointing** — pointing reads as an attack
- **Stand at an angle**, not squared up. And **don't turn your back**
- **Don't stare them down**
- Then **listen, ask why, acknowledge they're angry** — not agreeing, just lowering the temperature — and **offer a way out** that lets them leave without losing face

One limit worth adding yourself. Robert's rule for a situation that's turning physical is *first your feet, then your voice* — you leave, then you tell somebody. The version to say at your kitchen table:

If it's physical, or about to be, you don't step in. You go get an adult, and you go fast. Nobody is asking a thirteen-year-old to get hurt. Walking over is for the ten seconds *before* it gets there.

Five questions worth asking

Not all at once, and not across a table. In the car, on a walk, doing dishes — anywhere they don't have to make eye contact.

1. *What's in your "anywhere box"? The one you can do and nobody would notice.*
2. *Has anybody had a bad week at school? What happened?*
(Asking about somebody else gets you several times what asking about them does.)
3. *Is there a kid who never gets included? What do you think that's like?*
4. *If you saw somebody getting it — what would you actually do?*
5. *Who's the adult at school you'd go to if something was wrong?*
(If there isn't a quick answer, that's the most useful thing you'll learn all term — and it's one email to fix.)

One-word answers are normal, not failure. Ask once, accept it, move on. Next week works. Three times tonight closes the door.

And **answer them yourself first** if it stalls. Tell them about a day you snapped at somebody who hadn't done anything. They'll match your level of honesty and not exceed it.

Swap these

Instead of	Try
"Don't talk to me like that."	"Did something already go wrong today?"
"Just ignore them."	"What do you think they're after?"
"Were you being bullied?"	"Was that an accident, mean, or did it keep happening?"
"Why would you do that?"	"What were you hoping would happen?"
"That's a stupid thing to think."	"Wait — you see four? How?"
"Don't be a snitch."	"Telling gets somebody out of trouble. That's different."
"That's not a big deal."	"That sounds like it felt big."

If your child is the one doing it

This section is here because somebody reading this needs it, and nobody puts it in the booklet.

Nobody is born a bully. Robert says it in the assembly and means it as genuinely good news: a learned behavior can be unlearned, and a thirteen-year-old is extremely capable of changing.

A few things that help:

Separate the child from the behavior, out loud. *"You are not a cruel person. You did a cruel thing, and we're going to fix it."* A child who believes they've been labeled will defend the label.

Find out what's underneath. It's usually one of three things: they're copying somebody, they're getting a laugh and don't know another way to get one, or something is going badly and it's coming out sideways. The third is the most common and the easiest to miss.

Name the insecurity without using it as an insult. *Blowing out somebody else's candle doesn't make yours glow any brighter* is a sentence a thirteen-year-old can hear. *"You're only doing this because you feel bad about yourself"* is not.

Make the repair concrete. An apology that costs nothing teaches nothing. *What are you going to do for that person this week?*

Don't pile on. If the school has handled it, your job at home is to make change feel possible, not to add a second punishment.

When it's more than this

Most of what happens between middle schoolers is ordinary and survivable. Some of it isn't.

Signals worth acting on:

- Not wanting to go to school, for **weeks** rather than days
- Stomachaches or headaches with no cause, especially on school mornings

- A sudden drop in a friendship group, with no explanation offered
- Things going "missing" or coming home broken
- A phone that's suddenly secret, or suddenly abandoned
- Saying they're worthless, or that nobody likes them, or that it would be better if they weren't there
- **Anything that frightens you**

Trust that last one. Parents are usually right about this, and the cost of being wrong is one unnecessary phone call.

Start with your child's teacher and school counselor. If something is being handled and it isn't getting better, go back. Persistence is appropriate.

If you ever need someone right now: in the US, call or text **988** — the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. It is free, 24/7, and **it is for worried parents too**, not only for the person in crisis. Asking a child a direct question does not put the idea in their head; that worry is common and the evidence doesn't support it.

The short version

If you read nothing else in this booklet, these are the sentences from the assembly. **Use the exact words** — your child will recognize them, and that recognition is what makes it land.

"Be curious, not judgmental."

"Put yourself in their shoes."

"Not wrong — just different."

"Wait — you see four? How?"

"Put it down. Calm down. Then go talk to them."

"Blowing out somebody else's candle doesn't make yours glow brighter."

"Nobody is born a bully."

"Hey. What's going on?" — then "cool, come on, let's go."

About Robert

Robert Hackenson Jr., MBA, CAOL is the founder of Dynamic Influence, a professional magician and certified hypnotist, and a professional member of the National Speakers Association. He has spent more than twenty years as a prevention educator, working with students, parents and educators in 49 states and internationally.

His approach is deliberately non-fear-based — magic and audience participation rather than scare tactics, because fear wears off in about a week and understanding doesn't.

"Let's Talk Respect" runs for upper elementary and middle school; **"Kindness & Respect"** is the lower elementary version. There are also programs on goal setting, digital and social media safety, and substance awareness.

dynamicinfluence.com · *Thank you for reading this. The fact that you did says more to your child than anything in it.*